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Low-level worker called valuable spy

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WASHINGTON → Low-level employees with broad access to secrets can do more harm than high-ranking spies, according to retired Adm. Bobby Inman, who once headed the National Security Agency and later was No. 2 at the Central Intelligence Agency.

The most recent of a raft of spy cases involves Ronald W. Pelton, who left the NSA in 1979 and shortly thereafter, the government charges, approached the Soviet Embassy here with an offer of NSA secrets.

Admiral Inman, relying solely on press reports, said in a telephone interview last night that it appeared Mr. Pelton was a low-level employee of the agency, but that such a fact was not reassuring. For one thing, the admiral said, "every spy case hurts. There are no such things as ones that do no damage."

For another, he said, low-level employees with access to secrets are frequently better spies than those with access to policy-making councils. Spies in policy-making councils may offer reports colored by their own bias, he said.

He said the better spy might be someone such as a communications technician with access to documents or other hard information, "the guy who'll give you actual copies of messages, the sole most valuable source, particularly if you can sustain it over a long time."

The depth of the damage a spy can do, he said, is determined by the breadth of access to secrets, and that is not always a matter of how

senior the spy is.

More broadly, he said, U.S. counterintelligence agents are facing "a whole new, tougher environment" in their attempts to catch spies motivated mostly by money who do little to tip their hands in conventional ways. Admiral Inman said last night in a telephone interview that "you have to wonder how counterintelligence deals with this."

In many recent cases, it was the would-be spy with U.S. secrets to sell who allegedly made the initial approach to the Soviet Union.

"The tip-off appears to be financial distress, but in a society where you've got 4 million people with [security] clearances, how do you track that? I haven't begun to come to grips with the scale of that problem," he said.

In these situations, traditional ploys — such as watching opposing agents to see whom they are attempting to recruit or being alert to conduct that could lead to blackmail — are not enough, he said.

When employees quit intelligence agencies or are fired, counterintelligence officers lose their edge, he said.

"If the employee served long enough to retire, then you've got a string on them," the retired admiral said. "You can always call them back; you can do other things. But if they've resigned, that's the end of the string. They become just like any other U.S. citizen, but they're walking around with a lot of knowledge."

Surveillance is maintained on places where the Soviets are known to bring American spies, such as Moscow's embassy in Vienna, Austria, where Mr. Pelton apparently went twice. Such surveillance is not foolproof. Admiral Inman said: "It's pretty hard to identify every American who goes in and out."

He said he expected there would be more cases coming from agencies that generate America's secrets, as well as those charged with finding out the adversary's secrets.